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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at why there are so few teacher researchers and how such professionals can be encouraged, in the light of the reform movement in both general and special education which demands that teachers take on new roles including that of researcher. Institutions of higher education are urged to show their respect for research by teaching teachers validated instructional methods, teaching them such critical skills as reading and evaluating the research literature, and supporting teachers who seek to innovate or question currently popular teaching methods. Local education agencies are urged to encourage faculty to research and evaluate various educational products, utilize available university resource personnel, work toward better communication between teachers and principals, and make data part of the school culture. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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Developing Teacher Researchers: Preservice and Inservice Considerations

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The reform movement in both general and special education has called for restructuring education. The emphasis in reform is the shift from inputs such as books and types of courses offered, to outputs, such as achievement and student knowledge. Reform also calls for new activities and roles for teachers such as identifying practices necessary to achieve school goals and participating in staff development, including conducting inservice for peers and helping to collect and interpret evaluation data related to improvement goals (Caldwell & Wood, 1988).

Teachers will be asked to perform a broader range of roles than perhaps ever before. With the movement to make schools a central part of the community, teachers now may play coordination roles among social, vocational, and health services. Often, teachers are asked to assume administrative and leadership duties that come with experience and their particular expertise (e.g., computer or early childhood knowledge). And, special educators must interact more closely with parents and collaborate with general educators. These facets of a teacher's responsibilities are obviously time and labor intensive. The important role of the researcher will emerge as reform asks teachers to participate in site based management, program development, and process and product evaluation. Inevitably, teacher training and support systems must respond to reform's challenges.

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Defining the Issue

If new roles for both general and special educators include understanding data, focusing on outcomes evaluation, and participating in site based change (Caldwell & Wood, 1988), then the notion of teachers as researchers, often called for by professionals in special education (Lewis & Blackhurst,1983; Nevin, Paolucci-Whitcomb, Duncan, & Thibodeau, 1982; Newcomer, 1982; Rose, 1981), becomes ever more relevant to reform. IHE's and LEA's both have an important contribution to make if there is serious commitment to training and supporting the kind of teacher that possesses technical skills needed for the nineties. If development of teacher researchers is worthwhile, why are there few such teachers now, and how might we develop and support such a professional in the future? The purpose of this paper is to speculate about the answers.

Research is conducted for a number of purposes and by a number of methods. Bay (1992) discusses the notion of action research and points to its value in improving the educational process. Action research serves the purpose to provide immediate answers to problems. While the other purposes of research--basic, applied, evaluation and research and development--can be useful to schools, it is the need to answer immediate questions that often prompts teachers and administrators to seek assistance.

Various research methods are useful for teachers and administrators. Qualitative methods such as historic research may address why a particular school policy or procedure came to be. Descriptive research, such as parent opinions, obtained by personal

interviews, or surveys about topics planned for a parent/teacher organization meeting provides information about the status of a subject. Correlational research may provide answers about what events occur together, such as school absenteeism and rate of office referrals for misbehavior. The causal/comparative or experimental method permits answering questions about what treatment shows the greatest change in students, or which of two teaching methods is most effective. While determination of the "cause" of a phenomenon is the most complex of the research problems, determination of causal or functional relationships may be the most relevant to evaluating teacher controlled treatments.

Why Don't Teachers Research: Some IHE Obstacles and Solutions

In IHE's we speak often of the value of teacher researchers, yet we do not train many teachers who claim vigorously to value research or try it in their classroom or community setting. Perhaps a number of things that we do contribute to the lack of faith in research or a passing interest in it.

Teach Teachers Validated Methods

First, we must look at what we tell our students. The techniques and teaching strategies we endorse frequently lack support, either qualitative or quantitative, or only demonstrate marginal efficacy. For example, there is a sizable commitment to the whole language approach in education. However, Stahl and Miller (1989) point to recent studies showing stronger comparative effects for basal reading approaches. Additionally, current research does not support whole language use

with disadvantaged readers. When teacher trainers endorse a particular instructional approach, do they point to studies that accompany the approach? The answer is unknown. But teacher trainers should be cautioned to model, for preservice teachers, that in IHE's research is valued and it guides our curricular prerogatives.

Teach Your Teachers Well

Some schools require an undergraduate introductory research course for teachers and others require it at the beginning graduate level. This is commendable, but who should teach these courses? Are the most effective instructors chosen? If we want teachers to react positively to research, then we must carefully assign faculty, employing those enthusiastic instructors who are sensitive to the politics and policies of the schools, to deliver both qualitative and quantitative research competencies.

Do we teach teachers how to read their own literature as part of research courses? The answer to this varies across universities, if not from instructor to instructor. In research courses, it is common to require that students generate a practice research proposal or literature review. However, the skill we should value, at least equally, is reading the literature and making judgments about its believability and usefulness, so ultimately teachers may translate results into practice. The time devoted to developing research reading and appraisal skills should be a large part of introductory research courses for teachers.

Know Your Constituency

IHE's need to engage in qualitative research and ask teachers why they do or do not engage in classroom research or research reading to seek solutions to classroom problems. The author interviewed a beginning graduate research class for teachers about perceived obstacles to reading and conducting research. The responses obtained were both enlightening and worrisome. The respondents enrolled in an urban university, all reported that they do not have the time to conduct research. This is an understandable response. A few stated it is not part of their job responsibility. This information reflects more traditional teacher roles; however, in the future research may be part of a teacher's job description. Interestingly, some said they thought the companies selling tests and materials had thoroughly researched their products and there was no need for teachers to do it--an unfortunate assumption to make, given the history of some pharmaceutical companies and their products and the history of some commonly employed tests and remediation techniques in special education.

Other class members said that easy access to a research library or professional journal was not available. This could be remedied. But, the most nettlesome response came from many who said that the state and county dictate what and how they must teach. So, if they determined that a particular technique or curriculum was successful, but it violated district policy, then they felt it would be perceived as "bucking" the system. This last response was disheartening. LEA's must participate in supporting teachers as innovators and questioners of currently popular or endorsed teaching methods, otherwise teachers

will view themselves simply as employees following directions. It is certainly not the professional image of active participation in school reform called for by policy leaders.

What Can LEA's Do?

Demand More from Vendors

Research information rarely accompanies the materials or teacher's purchase. Unfortunately, validation is often assumed by consumers of the myriad of materials. Even when salespeople claim that the material or testing/teaching package is validated, some form of primary evidence should be offered. Recently, for example, controversy over learning styles has surfaced. Claims have been made for the efficacy of this commercially marketed system, while in reality the research base is highly questionable (Snider, 1992). Perhaps schools could develop a quality control coordinator position at the central office to investigate product reviews or conduct validation studies. Informed opinions could be made available to principals and teachers anticipating purchases. Large school sites could have their own coordinator. The position could rotate among faculty and provide release time to research and evaluate various educational products. If research information about methods is readily available, teachers will become informed and more critical consumers.

Seek Available Resource Personnel

Many university faculty are quite willing to assist and advise LEA teachers or past students encountering instructional difficulties or when teachers desire to study school-wide needs. For faculty, especially junior faculty seeking research activities, such partnerships

would be quite valued. Teachers can invite faculty to local professional meetings and set aside time for roundtable problem solving or discussion of the latest research. Faculty should invite teachers to talk to preservice classes about their classroom challenges, and those exchanges could generate researchable topics. Programs with advanced graduate training are in an excellent position to form research partnerships with teachers. Stevens, Bott, Slaton, and Bunney (1992) found that teachers participating in a collaborative research effort with university faculty reported benefits of increased awareness of effective instructional practices, ability to perform better, and a supportive atmosphere for problem solving.

Teachers and Principals Need to Talk

In a recent interview with the CEO of a small, but surprisingly successful steel mill in Ohio, the CEO was asked to what did the company attribute its success, especially since the steel industry is depressed in the United States. The CEO replied, "We talk to each other around here." Each level of management feels free to talk among themselves and to workers, and workers feel free to talk to management. The result is problem resolution while efficiency is encouraged, and the company is a standout in an otherwise highly troubled industry.

Schools in the past have encouraged quality circles in which teachers could cooperatively work toward school improvement (Hunnicutt, 1987). Site based, research driven quality circles could be formed so teachers have the opportunity (and the job responsibility along with administrative support) to explore genuinely validated

strategies to improve classroom practice, or to employ reflection and questioning to develop understanding of school processes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Teams are able to use each member's unique skills and prompt movement toward changes that the public demands in reform. At the district level, support for research based problem resolution and school improvement could be provided. For example, district offices send numerous memos to teachers and staff yearly. An LEA could produce regularly circulating research into practice memos as well as memos describing reflections of teachers implementing site-based management or ungraded primary classes. Teachers could contribute and receive recognition or even points toward certification renewal. An idea for the first issue of the school year might be "verbal strategies for defusing teacher-student confrontation"--it would probably attract wide readership.

Make Data of All Kinds Part of the School Culture

Principals and teachers can be trained (and many teachers are trained now) in relatively easy measurement techniques such as direct, daily, and repeated student performance measures characteristic of curriculum based measurement that would permit comparison of teaching strategies, or evaluation of outcomes among students in the academic and social domains. In the qualitative domain teachers could be trained in methods for gathering field notes, field work relations and analysis after data gathering. Follow-up studies from past graduates can provide insights incredibly useful for changing school policies and teaching practices. Teachers are often in the best position

to locate and interview past students, especially those who stay in contact with their teachers.

It is true, time is at a premium for teachers, but many interested persons want to share their time to make schools better places. Volunteers can be sought at PTA meetings and from the community at large to assist specifically in measurement and recording activities. Universities often employ local school systems as practicum sites. Every preservice teacher should have a measurement component as part of their practicum. Preservice teachers, in general, and special educators should practice obtaining repeated brief performance samples in basic skills of both general and special education students and in studying the culture of the school.

Preservice and inservice teachers should be at ease with qualitative and basic quantitative data gathering. Even young learners can help with recording performances or interviewing to determine student perceptions of school processes. At the very least, young students would see that teachers value systematic inquiry and observation. If data based opinions become the preferred basis for solutions to school problems, then an important part of school reform will be in place.

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